

These shoes are made for walking ... what to look for in choosing shoes for race walking

Reg Wells

“*Reg Wells, member of the Panel of International Walking Judges, examines the main features of race walking shoes with a view to facilitating less experienced race walkers in their choice.*”

For race walkers and their coaches the present influx of relatively cheap training shoes has prompted the questions "Are these shoes worth consideration by race walkers?" and "What should you look for in a satisfactory race walking shoe?"

Many experienced walkers have very definite views on the type of shoe they prefer to wear, but, faced with a far wider range of training shoes, how does the less experienced walker make a sensible choice? The anatomy of the foot and the mechanics of walking tell us that for race walking, a shoe should have a number of features.

1. Heel elevation

The shoe should have a heel or a substantial heel wedge. To obtain an adequate foot rolling action, some kind of heel elevation is required. After all, we spend most of our lives walking around in shoes with heels, so it seems quite illogical to dispense with them altogether for racing. Even if we were to walk around barefoot, hard skin would build up under the heel so that the heel would become naturally elevated. I feel that much of the flat footed walking seen in races can be traced to the lack of sufficient heel elevation. However it is worth mentioning that the actual amount of heel elevation required for a good foot action varies considerably from walker to walker.

2. Heel width

The heel of the shoe should not be narrow. Some training shoes have such

narrow heels that the foot is quite unstable at heel-strike and athletes can actually feel their foot wobble at this moment. It is preferable for the heel to be a little wider than the uppers to prevent this happening. In the last couple of years, roll heels have become very popular and the width proviso applies to them as well. They are designed to encourage the natural rolling action of the foot and, because of their shape, reduce heel wear. I do not feel that such heels are really necessary, but many walkers find them quite acceptable.

3. The heel cup

The shoe should have a firm heel cup which supports the foot adequately when the heel strikes the ground. The cup should be sufficiently strong that it does not break up under constant wear, but not so rigid that it does not yield at all. Some heel cups are badly designed in that the top edge of the cup curves in towards the heel and this can dig into the achilles tendon.

4. The shank

The shank is the narrow region between the ball of the foot and the heel. The uppers should fit well in this region and preferably have some kind of reinforcement. Many shoes also have an arch support. This can be beneficial to those with a tendency towards flat feet, but is of dubious value to others. If an arch support is uncomfortable, perhaps because it is wrongly proportioned for that person, it can usually be removed from the shoe without too much trouble. Shoes with a cut-out in the sole under the arch, or with a separate heel and sole connected by a narrow, flexible shank, are not recommended.

5. The outer sole

The *outer sole of the shoe should be tough and long wearing, but the mid-sole should be flexible enough to bend easily about a line just behind the ball of the foot.* There is absolutely no need for the shoe to be capable of being bent double and such flexibility probably means the mid-sole is too thin.

This leads to the question of balancing lightness against adequate cushioning and support for the foot. I think that some walkers are over-preoccupied with the problem of shoe weight. Many walkers have shown that they are capable of walking just as quickly in relatively heavy shoes. If the heavier shoes do provide more cushioning and support, then clearly they are to be preferred.

6. The inner sole

The inside of the shoe should be as smoothly finished as possible so that there are no rough ridges, seams, etc. which can cause friction and hence blistering of the feet. The areas to look at particularly are the inside of the heel cup and the stitching around the base of the tongue.

7. The importance of suitable footwear

Some people may find my requirements for a satisfactory shoe too stringent. Indeed, an ideal shoe would probably have to combine the best features of a number of models. Some form of compromise will always be necessary when buying shoes.

Walkers should be fussy about their footwear because, if it is ill-fitting or poorly constructed, it can reduce performance and cause unnecessary injuries. It goes without saying that shoes (and the feet inside them!) should be kept in a good state of repair with a careful watch being maintained on heel height. Heels which are too high or too low can readily cause shin soreness.

Another consideration is the type of heel used for races on all-weather tracks. If a walker uses a shoe with a fairly soft heel (to provide cushioning on the road) then he is going to be in trouble on an all-weather track which is also soft. A change to shoes with much harder heels than usual should eliminate the heavy feeling in the legs so often encountered on these tracks.

In conclusion, I think that if you shop around, real bargains are to be found amongst the cheaper training shoes. However, examine the shoes carefully and mind you don't buy yourself a load of trouble just because they are cheap!

